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TS # 142291

17 April 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Actions
in Laos

PROBLEM

To assess Communist Bloc reactions to the overt introduction of a US and Asian allied force of about 10,000 combat personnel into Laos to assist in garrisoning the towns of Vientiane, Paksane, Thakkek, Savannakhet, and Pakse.

DISCUSSION

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1. We continue to believe that the Communists have great confidence in their eventual success in Laos. Indeed, their confidence probably has reached new heights in recent weeks as the military capability and will to resist of the Royal Laotian Government has sagged.

2. Viewed from this perspective, the proposed course of action almost certainly would not appear likely to the Communists to reverse the present favorable trend. They might in fact

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anticipate that it would have the opposite effect. By taking up positions in the five river towns on the western border, the West might appear to Laotians to be forfeiting the rest of the country to the Communists. In this connection, the omission of Luang Prabang -- the ancient royal capital and symbolic center -- would be most significant.

3. In sum, the Communists would probably estimate that: (a) the Royal Laotian Army would be more likely to regard the garrisoned towns as safe havens than as secured positions in their rear; (b) the action would not in any way diminish Pathet Lao political and military capabilities in the countryside; and (c) the US would be charged by the world, especially the neutrals, with forceful intervention in Laos. We believe this is the most likely Soviet assessment and would be endorsed readily by the North Vietnamese and accepted, perhaps not entirely willingly, by the Chinese.

4. On this basis, we would not anticipate an immediate and violent Communist military response to the proposed action. The Communists would demand withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos and would hinge further negotiation toward a

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cease-fire and conference upon such withdrawal. They would appeal to world opinion, particularly the UK, France, and the Asian neutrals. They would threaten retaliatory military action to "protect" the Laotians but they would probably delay overt intervention until they had assessed the reaction in Laos and the world at large.

5. At the same time, they would probably undertake the seizure of Luang Prabang with Pathet Lao forces stiffened by covert Viet Minh personnel. Once in possession of the royal capital, the Communists would invest a Souvanna Phouma-type government. This government would declare itself the legal government of Laos. If covert Viet Minh support were not adequate to enable the Pathet Lao to take Luang Prabang, it is possible that regular Viet Minh units might be openly committed. However, in the absence of direct US or other non-Laotian support in the defense of Luang Prabang, we think it unlikely that this necessity would arise.

6. Elsewhere in Laos, the Communists would seek to isolate the five towns from the rest of the country. In this effort, Pathet Lao forces covertly stiffened would undertake small unit actions and guerrilla warfare.

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7. If the proposed action did after a time appear to steady the Royal Laotian government, the Communists might then elect to introduce Viet Minh units openly into the northern provinces and the Plaine des Jarres. If they had been already successful in taking Luang Prabang and installing a Pathet Lao Government there, the chances are better than even that they would do so. They would accept a de facto divided Laos, confident both that they could successfully present themselves to the Asian neutrals as defenders of the legal government and that from this consolidated position they could look to the eventual control of the remainder.